



Archbishop Justin Welby spoke of the need for a united church in his sermon at the consecration of the seminary's Immanuel Chapel.

The Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori, was the celebrant for the consecration. Later that day Archbishop Justin officiated at a special choral evensong service in the chapel.

Earlier that morning the Archbishop [spoke about religious violence and reconciliation](#) at the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington.

Read the Archbishop's sermon at Virginia Theological Seminary:

I Kings 8:22-23, 27b-30, Psalm 84, I Peter 2:1-9, Matthew 7:13-14, 24-25

In 2010, to the Glory of God this chapel burned, and was rebuilt 2015. I am slightly misquoting, but with a full heart, the brass letters set in the floor at the back of Coventry Cathedral. “To the glory of God this Cathedral burned, 14th November 1940 and was rebuilt 25th May 1962.”

To the Glory of God this chapel burned. Is it possible? Can such an event ever be seen to be to the Glory of God?

Why yes, because in death and resurrection we are drawn back into the presence of the living God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead.

Buildings are things of power, with demands and instructions. In the UK, the Church of England's ownership of 15,000 buildings – 9,000 officially listed as of historic significance and thus protected in one way or another, and unchangeable without permission from every heritage body you can think of, and several you can't [laughter] – such ownership is not always by every parish priest seen as a blessing. [laughter]

For those of you who have ever read the books by A.A. Milne about Winnie the Pooh, I don't know if they crossed the Atlantic...? [laughter] They did. I once asked Rowan Williams if he'd ever read Winnie the Pooh and he looked at me very dryly and said, “I have small children.”

And if you think that quoting Winnie the Pooh is a descent from the heights of intellectual splendour which today should deserve, I can only quote to you the words of Rowan Williams, who said: “There is almost no situation on earth which cannot be explained with the hermeneutical tool of Winnie the Pooh.”

There is a story of Pooh bear seeking to ride to safety on a honey pot during a flood. And if I remember rightly the story goes that “sometimes

Pooh was on the honey pot and sometimes the honey pot was on Pooh". Buildings can be like that. Sometimes they are the servants of the Church, and sometimes they are on top, her tyrant.

The Church is, after all, dynamic in its beauty and its figure, whereas a building is static. So why is it that we are so addicted to buildings, and what is it about this astonishing and wonderful and beautiful space that capture the eye and the heart and the imagination? What is it about this space, this building on a holy hill, that enables us to feel a sense of exultation and beauty as we come in?

Perhaps it is first because the dynamic of those, in the words of the psalm, "whose hearts are set on the pilgrim's way", is not tidy but shaped in the moment of engagement together in worship.

Professor Dan Hardy wrote that 'holiness, sociality and worship are – or should be – extremely rich and powerful notions and practices, and therefore capable of orientating vast ranges of life in the world.' So when we come into the containment of a building, far from being ordered and tidied, we find ourselves reoriented and transformed, and our perspective on vast ranges of life in the world is transformed with us.

Pilgrimage is an untidy process, because we pilgrims – all of us – are untidy, often chaotic. Pilgrims, to quote the prologue of the Canterbury Tales, "from every shire's end of England, down to Canterbury they wend ... " They are a motley collection of people, and the Canterbury Tales set out their variety and diversity. They meet up on the way to a destination. They do not know who the others are or anything about their background: it is the purpose and end of their journey that brings them together.

In this chapel of pilgrims, who have wended their way from all over the world, we bring together every joy and celebration that can be imagined – and we bring, in this building this morning, because we cannot see past each other's faces, every sorrow and worry that exists in the human heart, and every sin and failure that would horrify us if we knew them and if they were painted on the walls of this building.

Amongst any thousand people, especially if I am one of them, all Ten Commandments will have been broken (that's not a confession...)

[laughter]. And equally, not only will every one of the Ten Commandments been broken – by those who are sitting here today – but the fruit of the Holy Spirit that Paul sets out in its nine-fold beauty will have been amply demonstrated.

So we are untidy. As a motley crew we come with our virtues and vices into this building, not knowing each other's hearts and minds, barely sometimes even discerning our calling. Yet we are drawn together: together we discover the depths of our sin, together we recognise that we are

the cause of Christ's death on the cross, just as we also together glimpse the heights of his love.

God meets us as we are. Holiness is not neat and clean, abiding by rules. It is fire and flame, consuming the dark and the dirt. It is beauty and fear, causing us to fall on our faces, appalled by our sin, drawn by its radiant light and healing heat.

But holiness is never tidy. Let this place never, Mr Dean, be a place that seeks to tidy people up. [laughter] How the church has done that in its history... and how we must not do that. Holiness is never tidy; it cannot be boxed into a building.

This is what Solomon cries out in his great prayer of dedication and benediction: that however great the building, the holiness of God cannot be contained.

Shaping and orientating (in Dan Hardy's words) is not the same as tidying or conforming; but it does imply change. Solomon's temple was amongst other things where the people cried for help, and Solomon prays that they may be heard. The first book of Kings was read in the light of exile; a period when God seemed deaf to their cries. Buildings in themselves promise nothing, but they point in their shape to the source of help: Immanuel, God with us.

Those who worship here should expect to be changed, even in what they seek; to find that beginning with cries for help for themselves they are orientated into cries for help for the church – divided, threatened, self-destructive without the action of God.

My heart breaks when I think of our divisions. How they offend Christ. I'm not talking about you – I'm talking about myself, about the Anglicans, the Christians around the world. I look at Bishop Suheil [Dawani], my old friend, whom I love and respect, in a place of conflict and suffering... O God, we need a united Church.

Let this place orientate and shape those who will carry the torch of unity.

Of course I am referencing our divisions as well, in which I am personally, deeply implicated. Let us recognise, contemplate and mourn, here in this holy place, that we are no better than Israel that cried for help. We too turn from God and lose sight of God's mission.

For us today the building in its wholeness, as well as its holiness, speaks of not only how we will and must be changed – we – but how ~~we have~~

been changed.

Peter, writing to a church on the verge of centuries of martyrdom and persecution, in a moment of beautiful contrast, says: 'Once you were no people, now you are a people.' The pilgrim crowd has been changed into everything that was first promised at Mount Sinai: the holy nation, the people of God, a Kingdom of priests. That is, those who make the links between God and people. Those who having received mercy are merciful, and whose lifestyle towards each other is accordingly distinctive.

We each, you and me, all of us – this is no condemnation – must become what God has made us. Malice and slander are to be expelled; I feel the jab of that in my own life. We must live lives in response to the holy Jesus.

But what miracle achieved such transformation for that motley crowd of disciples to whom Peter was writing? Slaves and people of no account, held in contempt by the world – how were they changed so that they overthrew an empire without drawing a sword?

In human history, apart from through the Church (and tragically, appallingly, often within the church), great change has been only brought about by force; by the edge of the sword and by the fear of death.

But for us, it is not fear but a rock of dependability; not the sword but obedience to the word of God, Jesus Himself. Jesus, at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, sums up the imperative of its command if we are to be a transformed and holy people that stands against the suffering and persecution that will always be the destiny of the Church in this world, of us in our own lives. We must build our house on a rock. Not any rock of our own choosing, but the rock that He sets us, the rock of obedience to His word.

We will only endure – this building will only be what it should be – if we are built on Jesus. There is no compromise with that message. Without it this is a museum of interesting social anthropology. With Jesus as its focus and centre it is a channel of the breaking in of the kingdom of God.

For Immanuel Chapel to live up to the beauty of its architecture, it must be a place not of tidiness or conformity, but of transformation and daily conversion, as Saint Benedict would have it.

It is to be a place where the encounter with God turns a traveling crowd of pilgrims into the people who meet God in Christ.

It is to be a place which accepts our motley variety and untidiness, because it is full of human beings who are all sinners; but in which those who come in as sinners find forgiveness, and go out with new heart and hope to transform a world in which otherwise darkness seems to extinguish light, fear surrounds and despair-filled suffering encompasses the weakest and the poorest.

It is through Jesus that this happens.

Returning to Winnie-the-Pooh and his honeypot, as all good stories must: this building is on top of us when we serve it, and becomes the servant of the people of God when it points to Jesus Christ, and where confronted by that mystery and love we fall in worship, find ourselves reorientated through the liturgy, are captivated by God's holiness and sent out to do His will.

'To the glory of God' may future generations burn with fire in this new chapel, just as they did in the former one – many of you here – to follow the words of Jesus in that chapel and on the arch opposite me here, and 'go ye into all the world and preach the gospel'. Amen.

9 min read

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